

11 March 2004
Lent 2 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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Shadows of our Saviour
“Joseph – Life-Giver in Death”
Text: Genesis 37-50; John 12:20-28a

The story of Joseph is a remarkable story. A story with many ups and downs. A story where even though Joseph is given up for dead, God is able to raise him up and use him to give life. And because of Joseph, the lives of many people were saved.

Joseph was one of the 12 sons of the patriarch Jacob – actually, his favorite son. His mother was Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved so much that he was willing to work 14 years for the right to marry her! And so when Rachel was finally enabled by God to bear a child for Jacob, that child, Joseph, became Jacob’s favorite. . . . But being a favorite can be a double-edged sword, and it certainly was in the case of Joseph. Because his brothers grew jealous of him, and their jealousy eventually blossomed into anger, and that anger developed into hatred – hatred so deep that (as we heard) they were on the verge of killing their brother! But saner minds prevailed, and in place of killing him, they decided instead to sell him into slavery, to some foreigners in a caravan that was passing by on its way to Egypt. This way they would be both rid of him and get a little money in return! . . . And anyway, in their minds, after he was gone, he was as good as dead! And that’s what they then told their poor father – that Joseph, his favorite son, had been killed by a wild beast.

So Joseph arrives in Egypt – a teenager in a strange land of strange people and a strange culture and strange language. Even as his brothers considered him as good as dead, maybe he even wished he were dead. . . . But upon arriving in Egypt, Joseph is sold to an Egyptian named Potiphar, who was one of Pharaoh’s officials. And the Lord prospered everything Joseph did – so much so that Joseph was given more and more responsibility and was moving back up in the world . . . until again he was struck down. Falsely accused by his master’s wife of adultery, he was thrown into prison. Again, as good as dead.

But the Lord continued to be with Joseph, and God enabled Joseph to interpret dreams. And Joseph did so, for two of Pharaoh’s officials who were in prison with him. And he asked those officials that when his interpretations of their dreams came true, to remember him and help get him out of prison. And you could sense a glimmer of hope in

Joseph! . . . But they did not remember him; they forgot about him, and Joseph was left in prison for another two years. Until, finally, one of the officials remembered him! And Joseph was given the chance to interpret one of Pharaoh's dreams. And that dream, Joseph said, was from God, telling Pharaoh that seven years of famine were coming, and that he must prepare for them. And since Joseph was able to interpret this dream for Pharaoh he was put in charge of making the preparations for the famine, and also distributing the food when the famine came. And Joseph did that not only for the Egyptians, but also, as we read, for his own family. . . . And Joseph said to them these remarkable words: ***“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. . . . You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”***

And Joseph, given up for dead by his brothers, given up for dead by his father, given up for dead while forgotten in prison – twice! – becomes a life-giver! The one God used to make sure his chosen people survived, so that His promise to send a Saviour through them would live on.

Now it is not difficult to see how through all of this, Joseph serves as a “Shadow of our Saviour,” who also gives life because of His death. For as we did last week, notice the parallels: Joseph was rejected by his own brothers. Jesus was rejected by His own people. Joseph was sold for a little bit of silver. Jesus was betrayed by Judas for a little bit of silver. Joseph was arrested and thrown into prison because he was falsely accused. Jesus was arrested and put on trial with false charges and accusations. Joseph, in the end, in spite of what has happened to him, still loves and forgives his brothers. And Jesus does the same, speaking from the cross: ***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*** . . . But most of all, as we have seen, both “die” in order to give life. Now Joseph didn't *really* die, but was given up for dead a few times. But that is how God was working. Working to provide life for His people. He had to lead Joseph to that point. He had to make Joseph “as good as dead” . . . in order to give life through him.

But Joseph is simply the shadow of the One who was to come. The shadow of our Saviour Jesus, who did die in order to give us life! For as Jesus Himself explained in our Gospel Lesson from St. John: ***“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*** . . . As we enter into the season of Spring, we see that happening all around us! Seeds planted in the ground and dying, so that they can grow and produce a plant that will bear fruit. And so too, our Saviour Jesus. He had to die so that He could give life. He had to die and be planted in the ground, so that He could then come forth alive and be the source of life for us! Planting the seeds of

His faith in our hearts. Watering us with His water. Feeding us with his food. Giving us life through His own death, so that when we die, we too shall live!

We sang in the Psalm earlier of God's deliverance. That He answers when we call. That His eyes are always upon us. That He will not forsake His own. Yet when we are in the midst of struggle, in the midst of trials and difficulties, when we think we are left alone and as good as dead, those words are sometimes hard to believe. But even though that deliverance may not come when and where we want it, these words are true. For Joseph, who felt forsaken and alone in Egypt. For Jesus, who was forsaken and alone on the cross. And for you and I. For as our "shadow" *and* our Saviour show us tonight, that is how God works. He is the life-giver in death. He kills so He can give life. He humbles so He can lift up. . . . And for you and me, that means that He must kill that old, sinful, stubborn, selfish, rebellious man in each one of us, so that He can then raise to life a new man. A man of faith. . . . And He has. For crushed by sin and the Law, you have been raised to a new life through the forgiveness of your sins. And now like Joseph, He will use you – to speak His Word, to give His forgiveness, to show His life – that all may receive the life that He has come to give.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermon Hymn: The Word of God, From Days of Old
Tune: Rockingham Old (HS #853)

1. Joseph

The Word of God, from days of old
The story of our Saviour told;
That in our sin and misery
Our hope and life our faith might see.

For Judah's lion wins the strife
And reigns o'er death to give us life.
Though once betray-ed by his own,
Like Joseph – hated, left alone.

But Joseph, given up for dead,
Arose and all the people fed;
That what began with evil intent,

Turned to the good for which God meant.

So Christ, who died upon the Tree,
Rose from His death in victory.
And now in life His food He gives,
That all who eat and drink may live.

To Thee, eternal Three in One,
Let homage meet by all be done
Whom by the cross Thou dost restore,
Preserve, and govern evermore.